

Chapter 5

The Classic of the Way and Virtue

Laozi
(c. 604 BCE – 517 BCE)

Daoism: The Way That Is and Is Not

Few if any philosophies are as enigmatic as *Daoism* – the teaching of the Way (Dao). The opening lines of this school's greatest masterpiece, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue* (*Dao Dejing*), which is ascribed to the legendary *Laozi*, immediately confront the reader with Daoism's essential paradox: "The Way that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Way. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name." Here is a philosophy that purports to teach *the* Way of truth but simultaneously claims that the True Way transcends human understanding. Encapsulated within a little book of some 5,000 words is a philosophy that defies definition, spurns reason, and rejects words as inadequate.

The Dao is limitless and its origins are infinite. Somewhat like the Way that it purports to teach and not teach, Daoism has many manifestations and numerous origins. No one knows when or where it originated, but its roots probably lie in the animistic religions of prehistoric China. Daoism's earliest sages are equally shadowy. According to tradition, *Laozi* supposedly was born around 604 BCE and died about 517 BCE, making him an older contemporary of Confucius. According to one popular story, when Confucius visited him, Laozi instructed the younger man to rid himself of his arrogant airs and then bade him farewell. As another story has it, the aged Laozi decided to leave the state in which he lived because he foresaw its imminent decay. At the frontier he was delayed by a border official, who implored him not to depart without first leaving behind his wisdom. In response, Laozi dashed off the *Dao Dejing* and left, never to be heard from again (although according to one story that sprang up in Daoist circles in the fourth century CE, Laozi went to India where he became the Buddha). The fact that Laozi means "Old Master" suggests to many that this sage was more a composite figure of legend and imagination than a historic individual of flesh and blood. Indeed, many scholars conclude that the bulk of the language, ideas, and allusions contained within this classic indicate an intellectual environment closer to 300 than to 500 BCE.

Whatever its date and circumstances of its composition, the *Dao Dejing* is one of the most profound and beautiful works ever written in Chinese and one of the most popular. Daoism, especially as articulated in this little book, has exercised incalculable influence on Chinese life, thought, and art over the centuries.

As you study the following selections, pay particular attention to the Daoist notion of *Actionless Activity*. Known in Chinese as *wuwei* and also translated as "Effortlessness," "Nonaction," and "Non-striving," this idea pervades all Daoist thought and comes closest to being Daoism's universal principle and driving force, in such as possible.

Questions for Analysis

1. How does Laozi define the Way? How permanent is it? What are its limitations?
2. Does the Way acknowledge right and wrong?
3. What is *wuwei*, and how does it function?
4. How does the sage ruler who is in harmony with the Way govern?
5. What are the *Dao Dejing*'s major criticisms of Confucianism and Legalism?
6. Why would Daoism appeal to some individuals in the Age of Warring States?
7. When Buddhism initially entered China, many Chinese thought it to be a variation of Daoism. How and why was this perception possible? In what ways was this a misperception?

The Way

The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Dao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.

Conceived of as having no name, it is the Originator of Heaven and Earth, conceived of as having a name, it is the Mother of all things.

* * *

The Dao produces all things and nourishes them; it produces them and does not claim them as its own; it does all, and yet does not boast of it; it presides over all, and yet does not control them. This is what is called "the mysterious quality" of the Dao.

* * *

When the Great Dao ceased to be observed, benevolence and righteousness came into vogue. Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy.¹

* * *

Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is.

* * *

All-pervading is the Great Dao! It may be found on the left hand and on the right. All things depend on it for their production, which it gives to them, not one refusing obedience to it. When its work is accomplished, it does not claim the name of having done it. It clothes all things as with a garment, and makes no assumption of being the lord; - it may be named in the smallest things; . . . it may be named in the greatest things.

* * *

He who has in himself abundantly the attributes of the Dao is like an infant.

* * *

The Dao in its regular course does nothing, for the sake of doing it, and so there is nothing which it does not do.

The Wise Person

When we renounce learning we have no troubles.²

* * *

If we could renounce our sageness and discard our wisdom, it would be better for the people a hundredfold. If we could renounce our benevolence and discard our righteousness, the people would again become filial and kindly.³ If we could renounce our artful contrivances and discard our scheming for gain, there would be no thieves nor robbers.

* * *

The sage manages affairs without doing anything, and conveys his instructions without the use of speech.

* * *

Therefore the sage holds in his embrace the one thing of humility, and manifests it to all the world. He is free from self-display, and therefore he shines; from self-assertion, and therefore he is distinguished; from self-boasting, and therefore his merit is acknowledged; from self-complacency, and therefore he acquires superiority. It is because he is thus free from striving that therefore no one in the world is able to strive with him.

¹ This is a criticism of the supposed hypocrisy of Confucians who claim to know and practice virtue.

² According to the Confucians, careful study and emulation of the virtues of the past is the primary avenue to harmony.

³ These first two sentences reject the Confucian values of wisdom (saintliness), knowledge, human-heartedness, and righteousness, all of which, according to the Confucians, will result in *filial piety* (proper devotion and service to parents, ancestors, and superiors.) See the introduction to *The Analects* for discussion of the history of this Confucian principle.

1 * * *

2 When gold and jade fill the hall, their possessor cannot keep them safe. When wealth and honors
3 lead to arrogance, this brings its evil on itself. When the work is done, and one's name is becoming
4 distinguished, to withdraw into obscurity is the way of Heaven.

5 * * *

6 7 *The Ideal Government*

8
9 A state may be ruled by measures of correction;⁴ weapons of war may be used with crafty
10 dexterity; but the kingdom is made one's own only by freedom from action and purpose.

11
12 How do I know that it is so? By these facts: - In the kingdom the multiplication of prohibitive
13 enactments increases the poverty of the people; the more implements to add to their profit that the people
14 have, the greater disorder is there in the state and clan; the more acts of crafty dexterity that men possess,
15 the more do strange contrivances appear; the more display there is of legislation, the more thieves and
16 robbers there are.

17
18 Therefore a sage has said, "I will do nothing, and the people will be transformed of themselves; I
19 will be fond of keeping still, and the people will of themselves become correct. I will take no trouble
20 about it, and the people will of themselves become rich; I will manifest no ambition, and the people will
21 of themselves attain to the primitive simplicity."

22 * * *

23 Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among
24 themselves;⁵ not to prize articles which are difficult to procure⁶ is the way to keep them from becoming
25 thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from
26 disorder.

27
28 Therefore the sage, in the exercise of his government, empties their minds, fills their bellies,
29 weakens their wills, and strengthens their bones.

30
31 He constantly tries to keep them without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those
32 who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act on it. When there is this abstinence from
33 action, good order is universal.

⁴ This aphorism rejects the principles and methods of Legalism.

⁵ Confucian political philosophy centered on the wise and learned superior man, also known as the gentleman.

⁶ Legalist policy favored trade.